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Political Problems and Prospects in Communist China

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POLITICAL PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN COMMUNIST CHINA

THE PROBLEM

To analyze Communist China's most significant political problems and to estimate its political character over the next few years.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The dedicated, narrowly doctrinaire men who rule China initially gained the support of the Chinese people by swiftly unifying a country in chaos. But their adventurist "Great Leap Forward" program failed disastrously, substantially reducing popular faith in the leadership and popular support of its programs. Despite their failures, the dwindling group of elderly leaders remain determined to carry through political and social programs that will produce a modernized China, and a "new Communist man."

B. This policy is the work of a remarkably small and stable group of men. Mao and his lieutenants have, over the past three decades, avoided major internal schisms and refused to admit younger blood into their ranks. In recent years the leadership has turned inward upon itself; it has virtually dispensed with formal party meetings and congresses while cloaking its operations in ever greater secrecy.

C. The party can exact obedience and compliance, but, despite its recurrent campaigns, the people attempt to improve their material lot and to avoid politics. These attitudes have widely infected the lower levels of the party apparatus as well. The regime is currently engaged in massive campaigns to "reform" or weed out errant party cadres and to "educate" the people to accept the regime's collectivist programs. It has announced that it will launch another production up-

surge, but this is likely to differ significantly from the ill-fated Great Leap Forward. The outlook is for increased tensions.

D. Mao is 71, and most of his dozen or so closest lieutenants are in their 60s. Mao's departure probably will not split the leadership, and policy is likely to continue along present doctrinaire lines. His successors will not have Mao's authority, however, and this may in time open the door to the growth of factionalism inside the party.

E. Mao's lieutenants will be succeeded in their turn by a generation of party veterans, now in their 50s. Although these men give no evidence of a broader, more moderate viewpoint, they will have to deal with a host of accumulated pressures and may perforce be more flexible and pragmatic. At least for the next several years, however, political and social problems within China are unlikely to prevent economic and military development or to force a softening of Chinese foreign policy.

DISCUSSION

I. THE LEADERSHIP

1. Mao Tse-tung has guided the fortunes of Chinese communism for more than a generation. During this time he has survived at least two factional challenges and has purged or set aside a number of his lieutenants. Nevertheless, the inner circle of 10 or 12 leaders has been fairly stable. This group is now, through age, nearing the end of the road. Mao Tse-tung himself, who is 71, is clearly declining in vigor and may be seriously ill; almost all the others appear to have medical problems, if only those incidental to advancing age. The average age of the Politburo is 68 and that of the Central Committee is 61. Since 1958, when changes in the 195-member Central Committee were last made, 15 members have died. About one-third of the remainder seem to be either in disfavor or inactive due to age or health. These losses have not been replaced.

2. The narrowing of the leadership base has been accompanied by a tendency to conduct party affairs with greater secrecy. For example, minimal publicity has been given to the operations and staffing of the party's six regional bureaus, a major alteration in the party apparatus undertaken in 1960. The regime apparently has a growing preference for *ad hoc* deliberations of the few top leaders rather than formal meetings. Under the provisions of the party constitution, a party congress, which would establish a new central committee, has been overdue since 1961. Thus a widening disparity between the formalities of party organization and the realities of power has developed, while the role and influence of those directly in charge of the party apparatus have grown.

3. The exigencies of the Sino-Soviet dispute probably explain some of this behavior. It is likely that some of those who are in disfavor opposed splitting with Moscow, while the position of those advocating a hard, unyielding line toward Moscow has probably been enhanced. By not formally dismissing and replacing the dissenters, Mao has preserved a monolithic front and denied the Soviets a polemical opening.

4. Mao is fearful and suspicious that future leaders, untempered by war and revolutionary strife, will falter in the struggle. There are indications that he is increasingly sensitive to criticism, and more and more concerned for personal loyalty to himself. Even senior party leaders, who once spoke with some originality, are now inclined to repeat chapter and verse from Mao's statements and the party line. The "cult of Mao" also serves to sanctify him and his writings in such fashion as to discourage future deviation from his policies. However, the cult has reached such levels as to suggest that Mao's egotism is becoming as overweening as Stalin's in his last years. At any rate, in Mao's efforts to get the "revolution" as he envisions it back on the track, he seems to be increasingly inflexible and arbitrary and shows a tendency to look back upon his years as a guerrilla leader for methods of coping with modern-day problems.

5. Since the purge of Defense Minister Peng Teh-huai and his sympathizers in 1959, there has been little direct evidence of dissension in the inner circle, although there have been some interesting signs of maneuvering for position. We are still unable to identify with confidence any cliques or factions within leadership circles. Yet common sense and the past history of the party persuade us that personal antipathies and rivalries exist. Friendships and associations based on regional origin, early party experience, and wartime service, as well as differences over policy, all tend to divide such a collection of men into groupings.

6. Since the establishment of the Communist regime, individual party leaders have tended to concentrate on one or two major areas of activity—party, or central government, or military affairs—and may tend to represent the special interests of these areas. There have been occasional reports of rivalry between party organizations and government ministries in Peiping, with Liu Shao-chi, Mao's heir apparent, and Chou En-lai generally regarded as the respective champions of these two groups. Over the years, Liu, party secretary-general Teng Hsiao-ping, and Politburo member Peng Chen have been advocates of a militant domestic line and have vigorously pushed Peiping's quarrel with Moscow, while Chou and Foreign Minister Chen Yi seem to be somewhat more moderate and pragmatic.

7. Mao Tse-tung has been preparing for an orderly transfer of power to the present Chairman of the government, 67-year-old Liu Shao-chi, who seems to be at least as militantly doctrinaire as Mao. Although Liu is capable and dedicated, he lacks the charisma and prestige of the almost legendary Mao. If Liu does not survive Mao, party secretary-general Teng Hsiao-ping and Politburo member Peng Chen, both about 65, seem the strongest candidates for the top position. Premier Chou En-lai, 67, has the seniority, stature, and popularity, but probably recognizes that he lacks sufficient strength within the party organization to take over. The top military leader, Lin Piao, is in chronic ill health and thus an unlikely candidate despite his relative youth (57).

8. We cannot be certain that with the demise of Mao there will not be a struggle for power among the survivors. But we see nothing to suggest that the initial transition will not be relatively smooth or that there will be immediate drastic changes in policies. Nevertheless, the passing of such a towering figure as Mao will inevitably have profound consequences. His successor will be a leader of much smaller stature and will probably have to contend with greater factional pressures. At least until he has consolidated his position, the successor is likely to have more difficulty in promulgating and carrying out extremist programs. He will be more vulnerable than Mao to criticism for any policy failures. The problem of bringing new blood into the aging hierarchy will probably devolve upon the successor. This is almost certain to cause increasing pressures from below for greater representation and accommodation of special interests and views.

9. There are enough party members in their 50s whose ties go back to the Long March days (1934-1936) to permit a continuation of the "old guard" tradi-

tion and policies for some time to come. Over the next few years, these men probably will assume positions of sufficient power to ensure their succession against any rival claims from government technicians and bureaucrats or younger military officers. This interim generation of leaders may be even more doctrinaire than the incumbents and are likely to be narrower in perspective; they will probably strive hard to continue Maoist policies. Whether they will have the abilities and staying power necessary to persevere in such a program is another—and unpredictable—matter.

II. POLITICAL PROBLEMS

10. Up until 1958, the regime had the enthusiastic support of important segments of the population and at least the general approval of the great majority of Chinese people. Since the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1959 and the ensuing economic disasters, there has been a widening gap between the revolutionary goals of the leadership and the individual, materialistic goals of the people. The regime can command compliance and obedience, but it has been unable to arouse the population from its disillusionment and its political apathy. Although there has been substantial recovery and a general feeling that the economy is again moving forward, the former revolutionary élan has not been regained.

11. China's enormous economic problems would severely test a Chinese government of any description. But the Communist regime, through its doctrinaire excesses, has added greatly to the problem. Faced with the prospect of imminent economic collapse, the regime had to halt its program of rapid industrialization and was forced to retreat from its ultracollectivist programs and to shift to more realistic programs which were adapted to China's limited resources. Nevertheless, on a per capita basis, food production is still far below pre-Leap Forward (1957) levels. Except for the military and one or two other favored industries, industrial expansion has not resumed its earlier growth rate. Even now, the regime can only hold out to the people the prospect of austerity and painful social change over the coming decade. Moreover, to justify the continued authority of the Party, the regime must rationalize and administer its new policies along doctrinaire, and probably contradictory, lines.

12. Much of the economic improvement of the last two or three years in rural areas is due to decentralization into smaller collective units and to production from private plots and household handicrafts carried on by individuals for their own profit. Despite the resulting production gains, the Chinese leaders are dismayed by this resurgence of "spontaneous capitalism" and do not intend to let it set the pattern for future farm policy. These "capitalist" practices are, of course, antithetical to the regime's doctrinal concepts. They also interfere with the process of siphoning off resources for state investment, and impair the regime's ability to return to massive collectivist production programs. The regime is obviously anxious to tighten the commune administration and restore its control in the countryside, but for fear of disrupting production it has so far moved slowly and cautiously.

13. Following the drastic decline in industrial activity beginning in 1960, several million urban workers have been moved back to the countryside. The morale of the industrial workers fortunate enough to retain their jobs is still depressed, though undoubtedly better than a year or so ago. There are indications that workers have responded poorly to various campaigns in recent years. Visitors to Communist China have been surprised by the slow pace of work and the seeming indifference of workers in the factories they have visited, suggesting a degree of dissociation from the regime and its goals.

14. One of Peiping's main political problems stems from the disaffection of the lower-level party cadres, especially in rural areas. This development stems from the onerous and contradictory demands placed on them, the requirement to enforce unpopular policies, the demand to set an example of personal austerity, and the hazard of serving as scapegoats for the regime's mistakes. As a result of their unhappy plight, some cadres have been guilty of financial corruption. Many have come to identify themselves with the people they are supposed to control and have developed a tendency to avoid responsibility by resorting to highly bureaucratic methods.

15. One of the most striking developments of the past year in Communist China has been the bitter attack launched against China's intellectuals. Mao is reliably reported to have said that "the intellectuals have never aligned themselves with us." Judging from the regime's propaganda campaigns, these recalcitrant intellectuals would de-emphasize class struggle and close party control. They favor more moderate, practical programs oriented toward economic development and improved living standards. In foreign policy, they appear to favor Khrushchev's concept of "peaceful coexistence," would reconcile the differences in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and would reduce China's support of rebellion abroad. It is doubtful that these views have any significant support within the upper echelons of the party. Rather, what the regime apparently fears is that these views will become influential after Mao and the old guard have left the scene.

16. The disillusionment of youth is probably greater than that of other segments of the population. Once the exuberant and zealous vanguard in building a "new China," their initial expectations were high. Now, finding their educational and employment opportunities severely restricted, they seem to display pragmatic and non-revolutionary thoughts. A full-blown campaign in 1963 intended to reinstill China's youth with revolutionary spirit and to imbue a willingness for self-sacrifice failed. Rather than responding as the leadership expected, young people ridiculed this campaign and displayed a degree of cynicism that shocked and dismayed the regime.

17. There has been no outward evidence of major tension between the party and the military since 1959, when Defense Minister Peng Teh-huai was removed from office because he opposed the Great Leap Forward and commune programs, objected to the interference of political indoctrination and non-military production assignments, and opposed the policies which helped bring about the with-

drawal of Soviet military and technical assistance. Since then, the regime has taken measures designed to enhance the loyalty of the armed forces. These have included increased rations, preferential treatment for the families of servicemen, and a sustained campaign of political indoctrination combined with a tightening of party control. Finally, the high level of investment in military programs has probably gone a long way toward satisfying the demands of the professional military. Nevertheless, the sudden abolition of military ranks in May 1965 suggests that the party is not fully satisfied with the "revolutionary purity" of the armed forces and that it may fear a resurgence of professionalism.

III. THE REGIME'S PROGRAMS

18. In the fall of 1962, the regime decided to halt its retreat from the original collectivist goals of the Great Leap Forward and commune programs and to launch a "socialist education" campaign. This campaign, with the objective, in the words of Mao, of "educating men anew and reorganizing our revolutionary ranks," implicitly recognized the political disrepair of the regime and the party. The extent of the political reconstruction required is indicated by the fact that it is envisaged as lasting five to seven years. It is now apparent that in mid-1964 the regime decided to elevate both its domestic and anti-Soviet campaigns to a new pitch of intensity—that of "sharp and complex class struggle on the international and domestic fronts." The revival of the class struggle theme, though largely contrived, provides a scapegoat ("class enemies") for previous failures, justifies a militant, rigid internal political program, and creates a greater contrast between the purity of Mao's communism and the back-sliding "revisionism" of the Soviet Union.

19. Although encompassing all classes and groups, the regime's campaign initially has been focused on rural areas, especially on the lower-level cadres. The regime's technique is to send into a locality a group of outsiders, including a core of disciplined and hardened cadres, to investigate misdeeds and bring erring cadres before "struggle" meetings where they must confess their crimes and engage in self-criticism. For those (and they are in the great majority) who have committed minor crimes and who willingly confess, the punishment usually consists merely of restoring misappropriated funds or paying fines, although it may also include dismissal. For more serious crimes or failure to confess, the punishment is to be labeled a "class enemy" and to be sent to a labor camp or, in the most extreme cases, sentenced to death. There is mounting evidence that the campaign is impairing, rather than strengthening, the fervor of the cadres. Their authority, effectiveness, and prestige have been eroded; many have stated that they want to resign; and some have even committed suicide. Since late spring, pressures on the rural areas seem to have abated; this may be largely in deference to production requirements, but may also reflect some recognition of these counter-productive aspects.

20. The regime has made it clear that it means to restore its rural controls and to get the revolution in the countryside back on the track. Peiping has revived the peasant associations which were used during the land-reform era (1950-1952)

to bully and suppress landlords and rich peasants. In the past year, Poor and Lower-Middle Peasants Associations and Congresses have been formed to "supervise" cadres and to keep an eye on the suspect rural classes, including the more energetic and productive "upper middle" peasants. These organizations may be used to press for an increase in the sale of grain to the state and in the accumulation of investment funds, overcoming the objections of the better-off peasants and those cadres who favor more income for commune members.

21. In another organizational measure aimed at extending party control, the regime is establishing political offices, modeled on the political commissar system of the People's Liberation Army, in all industrial, financial, trade, and communications organizations. Peiping has stated that this measure is designed to create a disciplined labor "army" in preparation for a new upsurge in production.

22. The regime's programs to deal with its problems with youth and intellectuals emphasize the concept of "remolding through labor." Hundreds of thousands of students (300,000 in 1964 alone) have been sent to frontier regions and the countryside for an indefinite stay. Such measures can be explained at least in part on grounds of a dearth of employment opportunities. The regime's political motives, however, can be seen more clearly in a new policy of interrupting the studies of college students (except those in the physical sciences) for periods up to 18 months to participate in the "socialist education" campaign. This is supposed to provide valuable revolutionary training and to remove the students from the corrupting influence of "bourgeois intellectuals and experts" in China's institutions of higher learning. These suspect adult intellectuals are also subjected to "remolding" through extended periods of physical labor amongst the masses. Thus the regime is attempting the well-nigh impossible task of providing the sound education essential to economic and technical development and at the same time producing an intelligentsia that is receptive to simplistic and dogmatic ideology.

23. The regime, though not seeking to provoke an international crisis to distract people from domestic problems, is using the Vietnam war to stir up nationalistic feelings. A good example of this is the current program to build up and revitalize the militia. The regime is screening militia recruits carefully and is careful to put political indoctrination ahead of military training. While the militia has its military purposes, one of its main functions is to give the regime another device for political indoctrination and control. Peiping's anti-Soviet campaign is also being put to domestic use. The regime has attached to home-grown "revisionist" tendencies the added stigma of identification with the despised Soviet back-sliders.

24. The regime has called for a new "production upsurge," and many current Chinese programs suggest that Peiping may once again employ the basic theories of the Leap Forward strategy: that the basic wealth of China is its manpower, and that this manpower is available for mobilization and regimentation through political indoctrination rather than material incentives. At the same time, there is considerable evidence that the regime, remembering well the disaster of the

Great Leap Forward, is disposed toward greater caution and realism. For example, the regime has emphasized quality and efficiency over quantity in production policies and has given high priority to birth control and farm development, all of which run counter to Marxist-Leninist tenets and the underlying philosophy of the Great Leap. If and when the goals for the coming Third Five-Year Plan (1966-1970) are revealed, we will have a sounder basis for judging the regime's strategy. If, as seems likely, the plan calls for a more intensive collective effort by the workers and peasants, the people's response will also give us a clearer idea of the degree of popular disillusionment. We judge the situation to be unpropitious for the success of even a controlled Leap Forward in economic development.

IV. PROSPECTS

25. The doctrinaire and elderly men who rule China are likely to persist in, and probably intensify, their political programs aimed at producing a new breed of man that will see the world as they do. We believe such a program is unlikely to restore the former unity and revolutionary élan. The reaction to the Great Leap Forward disaster is still strong in all sectors of society, and there appears to be a general, unexpressed feeling that the regime's pressures will not be carried to intolerable levels and that its more extreme demands can be evaded or withstood. However, if methods of exhortation and persuasion fail, the regime will either have to back down from its revolutionary goals or rely increasingly on methods of coercion and suppression. We believe that the present leaders, who seem to be increasingly dogmatic and inflexible, will not give way. Thus the outlook for the next several years is for economic and social programs fostering increased tension.

26. Although the regime has mishandled many of its programs, it has been remarkably effective in enforcing its basic control over the country. We see little chance that this control will significantly weaken over the next two or three years. The Chinese people would almost certainly rally to the regime and fight in the event of war. Peiping is aware of this reservoir of patriotism and is increasingly using the crisis in Vietnam to justify its programs and the tightening of political and social controls.

27. A leadership as disposed to extremist enterprises as the Mao regime is susceptible to factional rifts, and we do not rule out the possibility of serious strife within the upper rank. However, we have no good evidence of policy differences or personal rivalries sufficient to crack the discipline under which the top leaders have so long operated. Thus we believe that, even if Mao were to depart from the scene, the unity of the top leaders will remain basically firm for the next two or three years. Nor is there much chance that internal difficulties will force Peiping to alter its aggressive and arrogant foreign policies. Rather, the prospect is for an accumulation of difficulties and pressures that will have to be accommodated by some future leadership. Such a leadership, on present evidence, is probably some years away.

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